

Evans, Sandra E

From: David Marzahl [dmarzahl@centerforlaw.org]
Sent: Monday, October 15, 2001 10:12 AM
To: Attn: Docket No. 2001-49 Chief Counsel's Off
Subject: Comments on CRA Review

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David Marzahl
29 E. Madison, Suite 910
Chicago, IL 60602

October 15, 2001

Attn: Docket No. 2001-49 Chief Counsel's Off
Office of Thrift Supervision
1700 G Street, NW
Washington, DC 20552

Dear Attn: Docket No. 2001-49:

October 15, 2001

Docket No. 01-16, Communications Division
Public Information Room, Mailstop 1-5
Office of the Comptroller of the Currency
250 E Street, SW
Washington, DC 20219
FAX: 202.874.4448

To Whom It May Concern:

I am writing from the Center for Law & Human Services to comment on the Advanced Notice of Proposed Rulemaking on the Community Reinvestment Act

(CRA) regulations. The Center increases economic opportunities for low-income families, children, and individuals by improving access to public, private, and non-profit programs and services. Through advocacy, direct service, outreach, and training, the Center challenges barriers facing its constituency, thus promoting economic empowerment and encouraging self-sufficiency.

One of the primary ways the CRA affects the constituency of the Center is through our partnership with ShoreBank. Each year the Center provides free tax preparation services to the low-income community. Last year our services reached more than 10,000 families. Two of our tax preparation sites are located at branches of ShoreBank, where we partnered to offer the "Extra Credit Savings Program." In this, a client would come to ShoreBank to utilize our tax preparation services. We, along with officers from ShoreBank, would then provide them with the information necessary to open a savings account. This savings account required no minimum balance, had no fees and earned interest at the same rate that the bank pays on regular savings account. Additionally, if a client specifies direct deposit of their tax refund, s/he will receive the refund deposited into their new account in two weeks or less. This is one way to counter the predatory "rapid refund" loans offered through commercial tax

preparers. Our success with the "Extra Credit Savings Program" will allow us to market this program to other banks as a means to attract unbanked customers, facilitating their entrance to mainstream financial services. We believe that this program is bolstered through the retail service test included in current CRA regulations that we would like to see strengthened, or at minimum, maintained.

The CRA is critical to the low-income Chicagoland community. It is vitally important that we do not lose the progress made in the 1995 revisions to the CRA regulations. While CRA is far from perfect, it has become considerably more effective in opening new markets since the 1995

changes. The following is a list of principles that we believe should be incorporated into the final regulations:

1. Quantitative measures should remain a significant emphasis in the regulations. If the focus on quantitative analysis is rescinded, we will go back to the time when CRA examinations were based on process rather than outcome. At the same time, improvements in measurements that incorporate qualitative differences in lending, investment, or service activities are needed.

2. It is essential that the lending test continue to be a key component of CRA exams. The location, distribution, volume, and quality of an institution's residential, small business, and consumer lending are all important. However, the regulations should direct examiners to also evaluate the quality of an institution's lending. Subprime loans should

be examined for predatory features and lenders making a significant number of these loans should not receive "Satisfactory" lending test ratings. The origination or purchase of loans that violate state or federal lending laws should result in a "Substantial Noncompliance" lending test rating.

Any lender significantly engaged in payday or auto title lending at or above unregulated standard industry rates should receive no higher than a "Needs to Improve" rating on the lending test.

3. The investment test is critical to evaluating an institution's record of meeting the credit needs of its community and should be retained as a separate test. Investments are crucial to the capacity of nonprofits, community development banks, and others to serve the credit needs of those who are otherwise not well served. Exams should distinguish between different types of investment activity, between lower- and higher-risk investments, and between higher-return and lower-return investments. Investments in mortgage- and asset-backed securities should be reviewed for predatory or illegal lending practices, and banks involved in such practices should be downgraded accordingly.

4. The provision of basic retail banking services is vital to the financial health of low-income people. The service test should be applied to all institutions that provide retail banking services. In the CRA exam process, emphasis should be placed on branches and special weight should

be given to the current branch distribution. Banks should not receive "Satisfactory" ratings on this test if they are involved in alliances that harm low-income consumers, such as alliances with predatory payday loan firms. Banks that by their nature do not provide deposit products for low-income customers should have to document their support for community development financial service providers in order to receive a "Satisfactory" rating on this test.

5. The current definition of a "small bank" should not be liberalized to include more institutions, because if it were, consumers would lose out, as fewer financial institutions would be required to submit detailed accounts of how they serve their communities. Also, the small bank performance standards are not currently adequate. Since small bank exams focus on lending, their lending records should be examined in the same fashion as large banks. The limited scope and infrequency of small bank exams seriously reduces any burden on such institutions. All banks should be examined for their provision of loans, investments, and retail services in underserved areas and to underserved individuals. Exams should employ quantitative and qualitative measures as well as emphasis on assessment areas, geographic distribution of loans, and level of service to low-income people.

6. The existing regulations on assessment areas are not sufficient in today's market, where Internet, credit card, telephone, and other types of banking that are not rooted in bricks-and-mortar proliferate. The agencies should not only take physical branches into consideration when evaluating an assessment area but should consider where the bank takes a significant portion of its deposits or makes a significant portion of its loans. Also, no large bank should be allowed to go below the county level when defining its assessment area in a particular metro area or state. The appropriate agency should regularly evaluate a bank's delineation of its assessment area to make sure it does not violate the intent of the regulations.

7. The lending of a bank's affiliates should always be examined; this should not be up to the bank to decide. Failing this, the regulations should specify that an institution can choose only whether to have all affiliates included in the exam, rather than to have some affiliates included and others excluded. Moreover, all residential, consumer and small business lending products of all affiliates should be examined.

8. ~~Small business data, which are critical to the meaningful evaluation~~ of a bank's CRA performance, should be revised to mirror the Home Mortgage Disclosure Act (HMDA) format and be made available to the public. Data should be reported on each loan application, including race and gender of applicants. Small business renewals or refinances should also be separated from regular originations.

9. Institutions should be required to report and make public data on account holders, including income, race, census tract of residence, average balance, type of account, and whether the account was opened in

the reporting year.

10. The current definition of "community development" is too broad. In particular, "activities that promote economic development by financing small businesses and farms" is far too general. Business development activities should meet the following criteria to fall under the definition of "community development": 1) affected firms are small business located

in low- or moderate-income geographies or are minority-owned;

11. and, 2) the activity of the firm is not perceived as deleterious to the community (payday loan stores, liquor stores, etc.).

Thank you for your attention to these matters. Please contact me at 312.252.0280 or via e-mail at dmarzahl@centerforlaw.org if you have questions about our response or if you require further action.

Sincerely,

David Marzahl
Executive Director

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David Marzahl